

Key newly elected Democrats oppose free trade

The Miami Herald
Nov. 12, 2006

ATLANTA -- The good news is that the Democratic Party's victory in last week's congressional elections will put an end to the Bush administration's quasi-imperial arrogance. The bad news is that it will strengthen protectionist-isolationist forces in Washington.

A close look at some of the key Democrats who won House and Senate seats on Tuesday leaves me worried.

They are not the Bill Clinton-styled cosmopolitan Democrats who understand that a rising tide lifts all boats, and that if other countries grow, America will be able to export more goods to them. On the contrary, many of the newly elected Democrats are trade Neanderthals, who may push their own party farther away than ever from Clinton's support for free trade.

Take the case of Sherrod Brown, the Democrat who won a key Senate race in Ohio, the state that gave President Bush his 2004 victory. During his 13 years in the House of Representatives, Brown led the fight against the U.S. trade agreement with Central America and the Dominican Republic, voted against free trade with Chile, and opposed the 1994 free-trade deal with Mexico and Canada.

"We are against job-killing trade agreements that betray our values and destroy our communities," Brown said in his victory speech Tuesday. Brown recently wrote a book entitled *The myths of free trade*, in which he claims that trade preferences for Latin American countries are hurting the U.S. economy.

But Ohio's senator-elect is just one of many protectionist Democrats who won Tuesday. According to a study of 62 newly elected U.S. legislators by Simon J. Evenett and Michael Meier of the University of St. Gallen, a prestigious business school in Switzerland, the vast majority of them are significantly more protectionists than their predecessors.

TRADE SKEPTICS

In the House, 16 seats previously held by trade friendly congressmen will soon be held by trade-skeptic or anti-free trade legislators. In the Senate, five seats held by trade friendly senators will soon be held by trade-skeptic or anti-free trade legislators, the study says.

There are no cases of "trade-skeptics" being replaced by trade friendly members in either chamber, it concludes.

What's more, Democrats who have opposed free-trade deals will now chair powerful congressional committees that will decide whether to extend "fast-track" authority to the president to sign new free-trade agreements, after the current authorization expires in July 2007.

Rep. Charlie Rangel, D-N.Y., will become the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, which decides which trade legislation goes to the floor. Rangel recently voted against the Central American free-trade deal, while outgoing Chairman Bill Thomas, R-Calif., supported it.

In the Senate, Max Baucus, D-Mont., will replace Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, as chairman of the finance committee. Baucus voted against free trade with Central America, although he had earlier voted for a free-trade deal with Chile.

Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., likely to become the next House Speaker, voted against free trade with Central America, for free trade with Chile, and against "fast-track" authority in 1998. Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., the next Senate Majority Leader, has voted against free-trade deals with Central America, Chile, and Andean countries. Their respective predecessors voted for these trade agreements.

NOT A PRIORITY

It will be highly unlikely that the next Congress will ratify the pending free-trade agreements with Peru and Colombia, although it may support extending existing trade preferences with Andean nations that expire Dec. 31. Many newcomers to Congress oppose free trade, or don't see it as a priority.

"None of these trade agreements will be top priorities," says David Lewis, a trade analyst with Manchester Associates in Washington. "Pelosi and her colleagues see their mandate as one to advance on domestic issues, such as the minimum wage."

My opinion: I agree. The new Democratic Congress will bring a breeze of fresh air to Washington, putting a stop to the arrogance of absolute power, and proposing better policies on issues such as Iraq, immigration and stem-cell research.

But it should not turn America into a protectionist, to-hell-with-our-neighbors country. That would not only create greater turmoil in Latin America and result in more illegal immigration, but would seriously hurt U.S. exports, and cost American jobs.

It's time for globalized Democrats to keep their protectionist colleagues from taking over the party, and the country.